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ABSTRACT

Aspects of language instruction which "derive from the nature of language itself" are discussed in this study. The notion that language teachers should teach grammar exclusively is disputed. This position is based on the following generalizations presented in an analysis of the nature of grammar and language: (1) language comprises more than what is usually considered to be its grammar; (2) grammar is what is systematic, ordered, and formal in language viewed as artifact; (3) language is not only an artifact but a tool of man's linguistic creativity as well; (4) grammatical rules are like filters which protect the speaker from being overwhelmed with thoughts and sensations and which enable him to be selective in what he wishes to discuss; (5) the form of every sentence a speaker utters is affected by the determination of what is old and new information; and (6) although language is extremely important in holding societies together, its prime function is that of personal expression. (Author/RL)

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CREATIVITY, GRAMMAR AND THE LANGUAGE TEACHER*

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In spite of the questioning of the relevance of foreign languages which is currently fashionable in some educational circles and of reports that point to low foreign-language achievement levels[1], I still believe that a language teacher can be happy in his work. The intensity of happiness in a language teacher's career seems to be proportionate to the degree of professionalism he is able to muster in the face of adversity. For the professional, language teaching is a constantly growing, creative endeavor. Each class meeting gives him a new insight into the learning process and leads him to make adjustments in the format he has established. The professional language teacher eagerly listens to new theories of instruction and new views of language design. Yet, he is not afraid to hold on to what has been good formerly. Whenever faced with conflicting theories of language instruction, the professional works hard to understand the precise ways in which they differ and to evaluate the potentialities of explanation which they offer. One should not conclude, however, that professional teachers are eclectic. If they may appear to be, it is only superficially so. Eclecticism implies disorganization. The employment of various devices by the good teacher never obscures the understanding of the language which the student is acquiring in stages nor runs counter to building the motivation to speak.

It is sad to acknowledge that not all persons teaching foreign languages in the world are professional in the ways I have mentioned. In many schools and universities, native or near-native proficiency in the language to be taught is still the only significant criterion used to judge the candidate for a teaching position. Where other skills are explicitly required, they sometimes degenerate to a recitation on the part of the candidate of well-known educational philosophies and theories of grammar.

I shall restrict my remarks today to those aspects of teaching which derive from the nature of language itself. Specifically, I shall touch upon grammar and the ways in which language is an intimate part of the life of its speakers. My remarks will be successful if they can reassure you of the worthiness of foreign language teaching. In no way, however, will you be less awed by the enormity of the task. My central point is that the interpretation of language as grammar—that is, as a formal set of logically based rules which are "discovered" by the learner—is both pedagogically and theoretically restricting. In order to appreciate the validity (and correctness) of this claim (which, of course, runs counter to the present thinking of most contemporary linguists and language teachers), there are several fundamental matters to be clarified.

First of all, let me say that the views of a language's grammar as held by linguists and language teachers are different only in trivial ways. The linguist prefers to use a formalized shorthand where the language teacher might apply ordinary, nontechnical language to explain grammar. Both, however, attempt to make an accurate account of the structure of language. The same criteria of accuracy, completeness, explicitness and simplicity apply to both "linguistic" and "pedagogical" grammar. If a statement is wrong or imprecise, it is so regardless of whether it is written in plain language or in shorthand. Chief among the trivial differences is the mode of presentation. Whereas the linguist lays his grammar out on paper, the language teacher must build a pedagogy around his. Grammatical competence in a foreign language can be achieved in any number of ways. In fact, the teacher may choose not to explain rules of the language at all. He may prefer instead to put together some carfully selected sentences or phrases and let the student form the rules himself. No matter how the teacher may transmit his knowledge of grammar, the rules of that grammar cannot change.

Once we can understand that both "linguistic" and "pedagogical" grammars are attempts to characterize the knowledge that a native speaker has about the structure of his language, we can move on to a consideration of what a grammar does. A current notion is that the grammar of a language is a set of rules which, when put into operation, produce and/or account for the sentences of that language. When we know the grammar of a language, we can pass judgments on the "correctness" of the sentences we hear. We can decide whether or not these sentences conform to the rules. Depending on how detailed and inclusive we make our definition of grammar, we can include considerations of style (formal, informal, written, socially stratified, regional, and so on).

Whatever we decide to include in our definition of grammar, we never abandon the opinion that grammatical rules are not infinite in number. Even if we fail to make an exhaustive list of all the grammatical rules of any language, we intuitively feel that there is a limit to them. In fact, the speculations of some contemporary linguists have led us to believe that a large number of grammatical rules are shared

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by all languages and that individual languages differ mainly in how they convert underlying universals into specifics.

Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the transformational linguist's interpretation of grammar is the impact of engineering. Grammatical rules are interpreted as the blueprints of a language machine. Everything must mesh in the grammar. Nothing is superfluous or vague. The output of a transformational grammar is an infinite number of sentences—all well-formed and analogous to what the human speaker of the language might say. The parallelism with engineering is so extensive that linguists may even speak of the "power" of a grammar to produce sentences, just as one might refer to the capacity of a machine to generate horsepower.

The rigor of its system has given the transformational approach to grammar a distinct advantage over both traditional and so-called structural grammar. Traditional grammar is neither as explicit nor as integrated as transformational grammar. Structural grammar is more descriptive than generative, focussing more on what has been said in a language than on what could be said. The high-school (and college) student of foreign languages readily takes to transformational grammar because it provides explicit ways to generate countless numbers of sentences. A wide variety of exercises can be worked out based on substitution, expansion, rearrangement, conjoining, embedding, and other mechanical aspects of grammar.

As attractive as transformational grammar is, I shall still maintain my position that all grammar-oriented pedagogies are limited in vital ways. While it may be true that all languages have a grammatical system which is finite and mechanical, there is no reason to believe that languages are totally defined in terms of such systems. Language grows from man and is his creation. It exists not only as an artifact but as a tool to express man's thoughts and feelings. I shall have more to say about how language serves as a tool, but first let us consider one of the implications of transformational theory which is misguided with respect to language as a creation of man. Motivated by the rationalistic philosophy of René Descartes, the transformationalists have assumed that the grammar of a language exists in its own right and is discovered by the learner of that language. An equally viable theory would be that each of us *invents* a grammatical system for the languages we learn. It is a matter of record that, despite application of the four criteria of evaluation discussed earlier, grammars written by linguists *do* differ. Is the linguist who claims that adjectives are really verbs[2] "discovering" a hitherto unknown feature of grammar, or is he inventing a relationship?

Just as no two individuals ever speak exactly the same, no two linguistic descriptions are ever identical. Is this state of affairs due to the chance of discovery or to the creativity of invention in language? If we believe in language discovery, then we have to explain individual differences by saying that no one ever really learns the language in the same way that anyone else does. He doesn't "discover" all of it. If we take the stand that language is invented anew by each speaker, we are bound, instead, to offer an explanation of how these speakers resemble each other in the ways they do. I personally prefer the latter position. It allows for the integration of other knowledge we have about man. Since each of us starts with the same cognitive powers and the same anatomical make-up, we are bound to invent similar linguistic tools and artifacts, i.e., language. Moreover, our creativity is channeled in precise ways by our need to live in societies. Man has found it useful to live in communities and promote communication with other men. One of the prices man must pay for the protection his community offers him is the restriction of his linguistic inventiveness. Perhaps if man were a solitary animal, each would have his own completely distinct grammar. In fact, we observe that the fragmentation of communities brings with it a difference in language. Witness, for example, the differences between British and American English and, within our own country, the rise of special terms in socially separated groups such as the hippies.

As far as I can tell, we have not tapped man's grammatical inventiveness in the teaching of foreign languages in explicit ways. The temptation is to look upon grammar as an artifact, a finished product of man's linguistic creativity. The dominant influences in foreign language teaching have been those of the linguist and the anthropologist, with the result that grammar and novel cultural patterns have become the two major components of the curriculum. Lessons are often organized around one or more grammatical points presented in a dialog or conversation which illustrates a possible happening in the cultural setting of the target language.

It is easy to forget that much of our classroom activity is "play-acting". The grammatical exercises may be well structured but devoid of expressive need. The dialogs in which students rent rooms, ask directions, or order meals are equally unreal, because the participants are assuming roles and not expressing what is really on their minds. Even if the dialogs are learned perfectly, there is no assurance that the students will ever find themselves in exactly the same situations where the same exchanges will be possible. It is ludicrous to suggest that the student carry a copy of his textbook with him when he travels abroad in order to supply the landlord, the policeman, and the waiter with a part in the dialog. Not only does the unexpected happen, but the student may well wish to say something totally different from

what is covered by the dialog in a given cultural context.

There are formal ways in which the dialogs can be given a more lively touch. Each participant could be engaged in some activity concomitant to the subject of the lesson and then asked to comment on it. For example, if an expression is taught involving the verb "open", the teacher could have a student open the door while asking him to say what he is doing. Corrections are then made within the appropriate context.

While such techniques are better than purely passive dialogs, they are not as personal as contexts which lead the student to initiate his own verbalization. Charles Curran[3] describes an experiment in which several languages were taught simultaneously through the aid of counselors. Each student was supplied with a "counselor" conversant in foreign languages and was allowed to engage in group discussions on any matter of interest to him and the group. The duty of the counselor was to help the student say what he wanted and understand the other students in the group. Thus, the focus shifted from grammar and cultural paradigms to a direct need for personal expression and communication. Curran reports a high level of success. Students quickly got over their fears and anxieties about making mistakes and had little trouble in keeping the several languages separate. Perhaps most importantly, students became aware that languages are spoken by real people and are not imprisoned in dictionaries and textbooks.

Once the wish to communicate one's own thoughts or feelings is born, the learner finds himself involved with the new language in much the same way a native speaker of that language does. The new language is no longer just a set of phonological, syntactic, and semantic patterns. It has become a new creative tool. Pronouns, for example, are no longer little words which replace nouns. They now have real people attached to them. Imperatives are no longer special verb forms, but things you say to people when you want them to do something.

In my opinion, language teachers have worried too much about finding ways to get at the foreign culture in the classroom. Not only is the classroom limited by its four walls, but it is far more important for the teacher to select a few topics around which meaningful and personal expression can be built.

It has become customary to think of language as operating only in terms of speaking and hearing, or, by extension, writing and reading. Similarly, audiolingual programs start with the premise that comprehension (i.e., the hearing skill) is basic and leads to the "productive" skill of speaking. While it may be true that audition is the fundamental sense for language, the other senses have been grossly ignored. There is evidence that language makes use of all sensory apparata to some extent. Sight, for example, is important in the learning of pronouns. Freedman, Cannady, and Robinson[4] point out that blind children learn the pronoun "I" much later than sighter children. Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, wrote of her own discovery of language through the tactile sensation of cold water running over her hands. Serious speech defects, such as stuttering, can occur in the individual who has not developed "handedness", i.e., has not become a right- or a left-hander at the age when it usually happens.

I do not mean to delve into speech pathology, other than to cite evidence in support of the importance of relating language to all of man's structure. It would not be an exaggeration, in my opinion, to state that language emerges from man's entire corporal and psychic being. It identifies him in a way that no other human activity can. In view of this, foreign language instruction which keeps to the bipolarity of speaking and hearing seems exceedingly limited. To be fair, linguists should also be criticized in their neglect of the ways in which language is interrelated with other ways in which man expresses himself. Kinesics deals with so-called "body language", but very little is done regarding how body movements and gestures are coordinated with vocal language.

One way to understand the mediational role that language plays in the processing of sensory perceptions is to think of it as a "stimulus barrier". The unique semantic, syntactic, and phonological structure of a language allows its speakers to concentrate on a restricted number of possible messages and disregard all others available through the senses. To give an example, the expression of number in English grammar guides the speaker in attending to whether each object perceived is to be considered a unit of one, of many, or as an uncountable. Chinese has no such grammatical mechanism. One must not conclude, however, that Chinese speakers are unable to perceive number. It is only that the grammatical stimulus barrier of Chinese does not allow that information to be processed in the same way it is in English. In the same vein, Russian does not allow its nouns to be definitized as t ey are in English. There is no definite article in Russian, but the speakers of Russian do not seem to miss it. After all, it does not bother us that English has no pronoun which discriminates male and female or animate and inanimate in the third person plural. As the counterpart to the Spanish pronouns *ellos* and *ellas,* English has only *they*.

Even if we were to contrast languages in those areas where the grammatical barriers allow the same sort of information to filter through, we would probably find that no language is so constructed so that all pertinent information is uniformly conveyed in all sentences. Wallace Chafe[5] has pointed out that

the structure of sentences depends on what the speaker considers to be new and old information. For example, if I say: "The horse won the race", I may assume that the hearer already knows what horse and what race I am talking about. The only new information is that he won. Otherwise I would have had to give more information, such as: "Canonero II won the race". This second sentence, depending on what element I stress, could be in answer to the question: "What horse won the race?" Or it could be conveying two bits of new information, namely, that the race has been won and it was Canonero II who won it. If it is not clear what race I am referring to, I would have to say something like: "Canonero II won the Kentucky Derby".

This sort of study has not been conducted with respect to different languages. However, it appears that languages often employ grammatical elements which are devoid of information just to satisfy syntactic requirements. Such is the case with the word *it* in sentences like "It's raining" or "It's snowing", which is there only to satisfy the requirement that all declaratives have a subject for their verbs. Note the lack of such a requirement in Spanish (*Llueve*) and Italian (*Piove*), which are capable of conveying the same amount of new information with the verb alone.[6]

My remarks so far today lead to the following generalizations which could be made regarding the nature of grammar and language: (1) language comprises more than what is usually considered to be its grammar; (2) grammar is what is systematic, ordered, and formal in language viewed as artifact; (3) language is not only an artifact but a tool of man's linguistic creativity, as well; (4) grammatical rules are like filters which protect the speaker from being overwhelmed with thoughts and sensations and which enable him to be selective in what he wishes to discuss; (5) the form of every sentence a speaker utters is affected by the determination of what is old and new information; and (6) although language is extremely important in holding societies together, its prime function is that of personal expression. As such, it is intimately connected to all human senses.

There are two additional matters which I consider to be of importance to the foreign language teacher. They both concern the so-called "creative" aspect of language:

(1) Language remains in a state of constant creation throughout a person's life. In contrast to the popular opinion that a child acquires his native language at approximately five years of age, recent studies in the ontogensis of speech point to a series of linguistic stages which come at different times throughout a person's lifetime. The psychologist Eric Lenneberg has described major changes in language occurring at puberty (after which foreign accents emerge if other languages are learned), at bone maturation (commencing in the late teens and marking even greater difficulty in foreign language acquisition), and even at senility.[7] Even the layman can notice the lack of hypothetical constructions in the speech of five-year-olds and the increase in the use of passives in adult speech. To date, the coordination of foreign language teaching materials with the age level of the student is done only intuitively. At the very least, careful contrastive studies should be done of the way the target language is actually spoken by speakers of similar ages to our high school and college students.

(2) Beyond age-generated changes, there is the creativity in language which stems from each speaker's need to respond verbally to new situations or to old ones which have somehow become institutionalized. Not only must new objects and ideas have a name, but new ways must be found to talk about the commonplace. Borrowing from the study of literature, I shall use the term "metaphor" to refer to the general tool used by man to fill this linguistic need. Applying a simple dictionary definition of metaphor as the transference of senses, it is easy to see that the commonplace expression *It's raining cats and dogs* must have originated precisely in this way.

The language teacher is better acquainted with metaphor under the title of idiom. An idiom is a metaphor in the target language which is not literally translatable to an expression with the same meaning in the native language. The French expression *J'ai faim*, for example, is an idiom for the English-speaking learner, who would expect to find something more comparable to his native expression *I'm hungry*. If we considered the literal translation of *J'ai faim* as having any meaning at all in English, i.e., *I have hunger*, it would have to be one in which *hunger* is being used in a special sense. While it is perfectly acceptable to say in English *I have money* or *I have clothes*, abstract nouns such as *hunger, thirst*, or *hate* do not usually occur in such sentences—unless the speaker is being metaphorical!

Idioms can be rather elusive, as the experienced language teacher well knows. The same expression in French, *J'ai faim*, which is idiomatic for the speaker of English might not be so for others. The Italian-speaking student of French, for example, would not find it idiomatic since he has something in his own language which *is* the literal counterpart to it: *Ho fame*. Why should an expression such as *to be hungry* be any less metaphorical than either *avoir faim* or *aver fame*, anyway? If we ignore the fact that there are different languages in the world, we may be left with no clear-cut distinction between "metaphor" and "non-metaphor".[8] It may well be that all expressions originate as metaphores and some become so conventionalized that we no longer recognize

their metaphorical qualities. Take the following expressions involving the word "heart", for example:

He died of a heart attack.
They got to the heart of the matter.
She died of a broken heart.

Whereas the speaker of English might readily say that *broken heart* is metaphorical, he would probably not question the "literal" status of *heart attack*. Yet, if he were pressed to determine in what precise ways *heart attack* is literal, he might have as much difficulty as he would have to find a nonmetaphorical sense for *broken heart*. *Heart attack* represents any number of possible malfunctions of the heart, in which the agent doing the attacking is left unspecified.

The expression *They got to the heart of the matter* is ambivalent as to its metaphorical status. Only with difficulty would it be paraphrased: *They got to the center of the problem* or *They got to the middle of the affair*. *To get to the heart of the matter* would stand, I suppose, as the most literal way we have of expressing that meaning. It is apt to be as idiomatic as any other expression if we seek its counterpart in other languages. French, for example, has either *la thèse* or *le point de l'argument*. Portuguese has either *razao* "reason" or *motivo do argumento*. Neither language uses the literal equivalent to English *heart*.

The effect of creativity in language shows up markedly in expressions for endearment. In French, a vegetable term *mon petit chou* ("My little cabbage") or *chou-chou* is the equivalent to expressions involving sweet taste in English: *honey, sugar, sugar plum*, and so on. An alternative to *chou-chou* in French is *mon petit rat*. Imagine the effect its literal counterpart, *my little rat*, would have on an English-speaking girl friend! These are only a few examples of a vast, language-specific system of possible metaphorical relationships. Certainly the student of foreign languages has to learn how to express the following in the target language: *hungry as a bear, angry as a hornet, busy as a bee, dirty as a pig*, and *strong as an ox*. Once he has learned such expressions, there is no guarantee that they will remain fixed. But at least he will have understood the general framework in which speakers of the other language create their metaphors. If languages were not susceptible to continual metaphorical creation, it would be impossible to write poetry, invent new terms, or use language in all the ways it is used by mankind. I would maintain that knowing the pattern of metaphorizing in another language is as much a part of becoming fluent in it as is learning what is usually called "grammar".

To conclude with a few metaphors, I have no panacea for the ills of foreign language instruction, but I hope that I have not opened a Pandora's box of other worries. My only message is that language teachers should continue to expand their instruction to cover matters other than grammar. I have hinted at some of these matters in my talk today. I think that in all of us who have learned to speak another language, there comes a magical moment when we finally manage to say exactly what we wanted to say with the assurance that it is correct and appropriate. It is unlikely that anyone ever forgets the thrill that moment brings. How fortunate it is to be a foreign language teacher and see that moment happen again and again!

NOTES

[1] See J. B. Carroll, "Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors Near Graduation from College", *FL Annals* I/2, pp. 131-151 (December, 1967).

[2] See, for example, J. Ross, "On the Cyclic Nature of English Pronominalization" in *To Honor Roman Jakobson*. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 1669-1682. 1967. W. Chafe (*Meaning and the Structure of Language*, Chicago: University Press, 1970) also calls adverbs a subclass of verbs.

[3] C. A. Curran, "Counseling Skills Adapted to the Learning of Foreign Languages", *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 24, pp. 78-93 (1961).

[4] D. Freedman, C. Cannady and J. Robinson, "Speech and Psychic Structure—A Reconsideration of their Relation". Paper presented at the 57th. annual meeting, *American Psychoanalytical Association*, San Francisco, Calif., 1970.

[5] W. Chafe, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-233.

[6] In my forthcoming book (R. Di Pietro. *Language Structures in Contrast*, Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1971), I call such forms as English *it* "dummy subjects".

[7] E. Lenneberg, *Biological Foundations of Language*, New York: J. Wiley and Sons, 1967. See especially the table on pages 180-181.

[8] This matter is discussed more fully in Di Pietro, *op. cit.*